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FEATURED TACTIC: CULTURAL ORIENTATION

For many applicants, an appealing aspect of service with an Indian health program is having the opportunity to practice and live in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. In some instances, applicants are looking for positions in communities similar to the ones in which they grew up. For example, one nurse recruit signed on to practice at an Indian health facility to help people who, like her grandparents, needed to adjust to an English-speaking medical system. Other applicants might be excited by the prospect of living among and learning about cultures different from their own.

However, when recently hired health professionals actually confront their new surroundings, many of them go through a challenging adjustment period that can shake their confidence and influence their feelings about making a career with an Indian health program. Taking steps to ease the cultural integration of new staff members into the facility and the community is an excellent management strategy for retaining staff.

RECRUITMENT:

Creating a staff that thrives in a demanding, culturally diverse environment begins at the recruitment stage. Interviews of potential new hires should include a frank discussion of the facility's cultural environment and the challenges sometimes encountered by new staff. This will help recruits develop reasonable expectations about the job and the community. Although addressing cultural issues during recruitment interviews might discourage some potential hires, it will help to ensure that those health professionals who do come on board are a good fit.

ON-GOING SUPPORT:

Cultural orientation in the recruitment phase is just the first step. Once on the job, many new hires face misunderstandings and lack of knowledge about the cultural aspects of their relationships with patients, other staff members and the community that can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. One potential solution is to designate staff mentors for new hires who can offer advice and help in the resolution of problems. Cultural orientation programs also can help. Here are two

excellent examples of cultural orientation programs devised by Indian health program administrators:

- *A transition program* being developed by an administrative officer at a small Indian health center will help new hires who come from different backgrounds to adjust to the facility and local community. New staff members will be assigned to selected host families from the community who will help them with cultural integration and provide friendship and support to help counteract feelings of isolation. The host families are expected to serve as a valuable resource for new staff members and help involve them in local activities. The program also will sponsor various orientation activities for new staff members within the community to introduce them to local history, arts, Tribal events and more.
- *An interactive program* devised by an administrator at an Indian health clinic aims to send staff members from the facility into the local community where they will meet with residents to inform them about the facility's services. These encounters will encourage community residents to take advantage of facility services and, at the same time, help facility staff form deeper connections with community members.

SOCIAL/CULTURAL ACTIVITIES:

You can encourage your staff to participate in social events sponsored by the local community by publicizing activities. Festivals, commemorations of important events, school graduations and other gatherings provide an opportunity to promote deeper understanding of the local culture by bringing new staff members into social contact with the community. Just as important, involvement in the life of the community can help new staff members form new and rewarding friendships that will make them more likely to want to remain in the area.

Efforts can also be made to bring the local culture to the facility through the sponsorship of special events planned specifically for health professionals. For example, in one Indian health medical center in a Western state, administrators help plan cultural events such as arts and crafts shows and native food fairs for hospital staff.

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Do you have successful retention strategies and your own best practices to share with your colleagues? We value your input, so please send us your success stories or comments. You can also add a colleague to the mailing list or update us with changes in your email address. Contact us at: [CEO Retention Insights](#).



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